Remembering Ray Yungen and Richard Foster's "School" of Contemplative Prayer

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Nearly eight years ago researcher Ray Yungen passed away at the age of 64. As regular Lighthouse Trails readers know, it was through Ray's work that Lighthouse Trails began 22 years ago.

Since Ray's passing, Richard Foster's contemplative prayer has infiltrated countless numbers of churches throughout North America. It is the late Dallas Willard who was the man who initially influenced Foster toward the contemplative path. We consider these two men (Willard and Foster) the leading pioneers in bringing contemplative spirituality into the evangelical church (something that has had devastating results).

We estimate that, to one degree or another, almost every church in North America has been affected by contemplative spirituality (i.e., Spiritual Formation). If that sounds like an exaggeration, consider this as one way this happened: In Rick Warren's book *The Purpose Driven Church* (his first book which has sold over 1 million copies), Warren identified Willard and Foster as the two key players in the Spiritual Formation (i.e., contemplative prayer) movement (p. 126). Later in his book *The Purpose Driven Life* (which has sold over 32 million copies and

been used by over 400,000 pastors), Warren encouraged the use of contemplative breath prayers (p. 115) and "practicing the presence" (via Brother Lawrence) (pp. 114-116). Between the two books, tens of millions of Christians and hundreds of thousands of pastors have been introduced to contemplative spirituality.

Below is an article Ray Yungen wrote about Richard Foster's contemplative affinities. We encourage you to read it because most likely your church has already been influenced by this deceptive anti-Gospel spirituality. If you are not sure, ask your pastor what he thinks about Richard Foster. You may be surprised at the answer.

A Serious Look at Richard Foster's "School" of Contemplative Prayer

By Ray Yungen

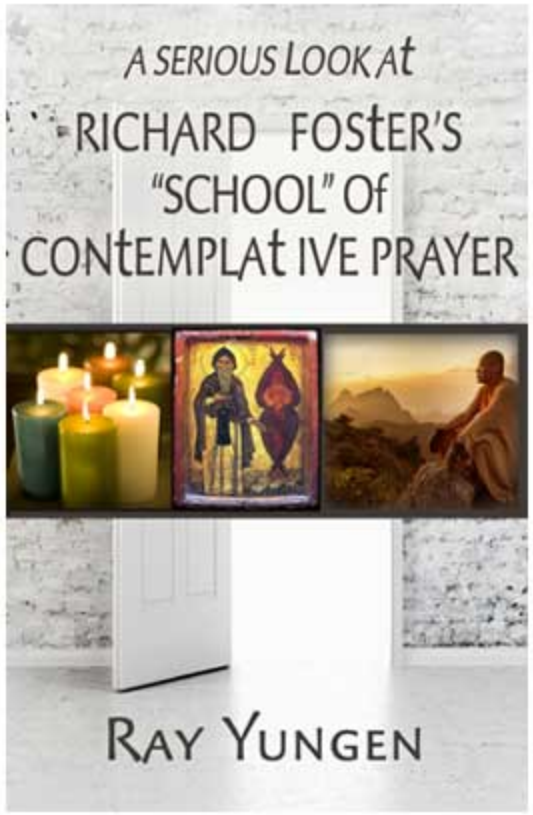
> [W]e should all without shame enroll as apprentices in the school of contemplative prayer.1**—Richard Foster,** *Celebration of Discipline: the Path to Spiritual Growth*
>
> Christianity is not complete without the contemplative dimension.2**—Richard Foster**

In Portland, Oregon there is a large bookstore devoted entirely to New Age spirituality. Every Eastern mystical and metaphysical topic under the sun is found there. Interestingly, there is a sizable section on contemplative prayer with Catholic monk Thomas Merton having a whole shelf devoted just to his writings. Why would a New Age bookstore give valuable space to a topic that purports to be Christian? *That* is a legitimate question. May I suggest the reason is that the "Christian" mystical tradition (i.e., contemplative prayer) shares a sense of profound kinship with the Eastern mystical tradition. There is ample evidence to support this claim.

In this booklet, we are going to examine a few of the major players in the contemplative prayer movement to show that Richard Foster's "school" of contemplative prayer does not belong in Christianity. In fact, as you will see, the message behind it is the very opposite of biblical Christianity and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What is the "School" of Contemplative Prayer?

In *Celebration of Discipline,* Richard Foster says "we should all without shame enroll as apprentices in the school of contemplative prayer." What does he mean when he says "school" of contemplative prayer? When Foster uses the word school, he does not mean, of course, a building or an institution somewhere. For example, *Webster's New World College Dictionar*y has nine different definitions for the word school. The one that fits what we are trying to get across is:



> . . . a group of people held together by the same teachings, beliefs, opinions, methods, etc.3

When one examines the spiritual context of this definition, one can see what kind of spiritual "fruit" it produces. The only way you can ascertain the real essence of a movement is to look at the leaders or prominent individuals in that "school" to see just where their practices have led them, what conclusions they have come to, and what propels their vision of truth.

Let's first establish what is meant by the word contemplation. Carl McColman in his *Big Book of Christian Mysticism* explains the context of it in the following way:

> [Contemplation] comes from the Latin word contemplare, which means "to observe" or "to notice." The word is also rooted in the word "temple," however, relating it to sacred space. . . . Once Christianized, contemplation lost its association with divination [soothsaying] and came to signify the prayerful practice of attending to the presence of God.4

So if Foster is correct, the leaders of this movement are those who have turned to the *presence of God* in a unique and profound way, and their methods should be followed to achieve the same results.

Now let's look at the spiritual perspectives of these leaders in the "school of contemplative prayer."

Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton, a Catholic monk, is the most widely recognized of the modern-day contemplative writers. His influence is enormous in the contemplative field. Richard Foster quotes Merton over a dozen times in *Celebration of Discipline* and in other books as well, and many other evangelicals also quote Merton. The following entry from Merton's published work, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (written during his last trip to Asia*) speaks volumes as to Merton's spiritual sympathies:

> We went looking first for Chatral Rimpoche [a Tibetan holy man] at his hermitage above Ghoom. . . . We were told he was at an ani gompa, a nunnery, down the road. . . . So off we went toward Bagdogra and with some difficulty found the tiny nunnery . . . and there was Chatral, the greatest rimpoche [a Buddhist teacher] I have met so far and a very impressive person.
>
> . . . We started talking about dzogchen and Nyingmapa meditation and "direct realization" and soon saw that we agreed very well. . . . The unspoken or half-spoken message of the talk was our complete understanding of each other as people who were somehow on the edge of great realization . . . and that it was *a grace* for us to meet one another. I wish I could see more of Chatral. He burst out and called me a rangjung Sangay (which apparently means a "natural Buddha") . . . He told me, seriously, that perhaps *he and I would attain to complete Buddhahood in our next lives*, perhaps even in this life, and the parting note was a kind of compact that we would both do our best to make it in this life. I was profoundly moved, because he is so obviously a great man, the true practitioner of dzogchen, the best of the Nyingmapa lamas, marked by complete simplicity and freedom. He was surprised at getting on so well with a Christian and at one point laughed and said, *"There must be something wrong here!"* If I were going to settle down with a Tibetan guru, I think Chatral would be the one I'd choose.5 (emphasis added)

An equally revealing aspect of Merton's Asian trip is what he experienced at a Buddhist shrine in Ceylon:

> . . . an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is *charged with dharmakaya* [the unity of all things and all people]. . . I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and *spiritual validity* running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely . . . my Asian pilgrimage has come clear and purified itself. I . . . have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains.6 (emphasis added)

Why would someone who was so heavily involved in "Christian" mysticism be so entwined in and enthusiastically embracing of Buddhist mysticism? I considered titling this booklet *Something's Wrong Here* because even though Chatral meant it in a positive way, when he said those words to Merton, he himself was shocked that Merton, a professing Christian, was basically on the same page as him and that they were able to *fellowship.*

One of Merton's biographers, William Shannon, made this very clear when he explained:

> If one wants to understand Merton's going to the East it is important to understand that it was his rootedness in his own faith tradition [Catholicism] that gave him the spiritual equipment [contemplative prayer] he needed to grasp the way of wisdom that is proper to the East.7

What Merton meant by "dharmakaya" is actually what the New Age and eastern religions call *cosmic consciousness* (i.e., God is in everything and everybody.) But Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, guarantees the reader that what he's promoting will not lead to cosmic consciousness. He states, "It involves no hidden mysteries, no secret mantras, no mental gymnastics, no esoteric flights into the cosmic consciousness."8

Foster's attempt to assuage any suspicion of practicing contemplative prayer is countered by William Shannon's assertion that it was precisely contemplative prayer that brought Merton into his embracing of this Buddhist worldview.

A skeptic might say, *well, Merton was just an anomaly who got off track, but in general the contemplative leads to the God of the Bible*. I beg to differ. To show this is not the case, we need to look at other teachers in the "school of contemplative prayer."

Henri Nouwen

Dutch Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen, would probably rank second to Merton in influence and admiration. Popular evangelical author Tony Campolo calls Nouwen "one of the great Christians of our time," stating:

> [Nouwen's] writings have guided and inspired Christians of all persuasions . . . whose life was a brilliant example of twentieth-century saintliness.9

Campolo's admiration is widely mirrored in the evangelical world; just as Merton is quoted in many evangelical books these days, so also is Nouwen. Kay Warren, Rick Warren's wife, is one of the popular evangelicals who sees great value in Nouwen's work:

> My wife, Kay, recommends this book: "It's a short book, but it hits at the heart of the minister. It mentions the struggles common to those of us in ministry: the temptation to be relevant, spectacular and powerful. *I highlighted almost every word!*"10 (emphasis added)

The book Kay Warren recommends is In the Name of Jesus by Nouwen, who devotes an entire chapter of that book to contemplative prayer, saying:

> Through the discipline of contemplative prayer, Christian leaders have to learn to listen to the voice of love . . . For Christian leadership to be truly fruitful in the future, a movement from the *moral to the mystical* is required.11 (emphasis added)

But just as Merton had absorbed eastern spirituality so too had Nouwen, which is no surprise because he was a disciple of Merton. Nouwen wrote the foreword to a book that mixes Christianity with Hindu spirituality, in which he says:

[T]he author shows a wonderful openness to the gifts of Buddhism, Hinduism and Moslem religion. He discovers their great wisdom for the spiritual life of the Christian . . . Ryan [the author] went to India to learn from spiritual traditions other than his own. He brought home many treasures and offers them to us in the book.12

Nouwen apparently took these approaches seriously himself. In his book, *The Way of the Heart*, he advised his readers:

> The quiet repetition of a single word can help us to descend with the mind into the heart . . . This way of simple prayer . . . opens us to God's active presence.13

But what "God's active presence" taught him, unfortunately, stood more in line with Hinduism than evangelical Christianity. He wrote:

> Prayer is "soul work" because our souls are those sacred centers where *all is one,* . . . It is in the heart of God that we can come to the full realization of *the unity of all that i*s.14 (emphasis mine)

Again, a Christian admirer of Nouwen may think the previous quotes could fit into a legitimate Christian experience of God's love and grace and that I am just taking these out of context. But this is certainly not the case. Nouwen himself revealed his spiritual influences in his diary, *Sabbatical Journey,* which he wrote shortly before his death:

> On our way to the health club I had bought a Walkman to listen to an audiotape with a talk by Matthew Fox called "Creation, Spirituality, and the Seven Chakras." So, while working up a sweat on the trotter, I tried to make my time useful listening to Matthew Fox.15

This piece of information reveals that Nouwen was connected to the idea that the chakras, (which the previous quotes are based on) are integral to spiritual development. The crown chakra, in particular, is the one that is tied to the idea that *all is one* and *the unity of everything that is*.16

In the book*, The Essential Henri Nouwen*, which is published by Shambhala Publications (a Buddhist publishing house), Nouwen said contemplative prayer "opens our eyes to the presence of the divine Spirit in all that surrounds us."17 That is exactly the same as what Merton meant by *dharmakaya,* that God is in everything that exists (panentheism, which mirrors occultism).

Thomas Keating

Thomas Keating, a trappist monk like Merton, is head of an organization called Contemplative Outreach. He is closely identified with the contemplative prayer (which he calls centering prayer) movement. Keating has written numerous books on the subject of contemplative prayer; in fact, one of evangelical Christianity's most popular teachers, Ruth Haley Barton, considers Keating to be a strong spiritual influence in her life.18

Keating actually makes this point when he informs his readers that "'meditation' means to people exposed to Eastern methods what we Christians mean by contemplation as a way of disregarding the usual flow of thoughts for certain periods of time."19

As with the others, Keating went in a Hindu or New Age direction, and he wrote the foreword to a book devoted to what practitioners of Yoga call the Kundalini or serpent power:

> Since this energy [kundalini] is also at work today in numerous persons who are devoting themselves to contemplative prayer, this book is an important contribution to the renewal of the Christian contemplative tradition. It will be a great consolation to those who have experienced physical symptoms arising from the awakening of kundalini in the course of their spiritual journey . . . Most spiritual disciplines world-wide insist on some kind of serious discipline before techniques of awakening kundalini are communicated. In Christian tradition . . . the regular practice of the stages of Christian prayer . . . contemplation are the essential disciplines.20

To show how far someone can stray using contemplative prayer as a way to reach God, Keating is a perfect example. Keating enthusiastically endorses a book titled *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey in Christian Hermeticism*. Fortune-telling Tarot cards are one of the major tools for divination in occultism; and Hermeticism is a set of ancient esoteric beliefs based on the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, the one who coined the occult term "as above so below." Keating said the book is one of the "great spiritual classics of this century."21 He drifted so afield from even Catholicism that it is difficult to comprehend.

Richard Rohr

Without a doubt, Catholic priest Richard Rohr is one of the most prominent *living* proponents of contemplative prayer today. His organization, The Center for Contemplation and Action, is a bastion for contemplative spirituality. And like our other contemplative prayer "school" masters, he has been embraced by numerous popular evangelical authors. Richard Foster, for example, had Rohr on an advisory board for a 2010 book Foster edited titled *25 Books Every Christian Should Read: A Guide to the Essential Devotional Classics.*22

Rohr has essentially become the new Thomas Merton to an entirely new generation of evangelical Christians. In an interview, Rohr said:

> [O]ne of my publishers . . . told me that right now my single biggest demographic is young evangelicals—*young* evangelicals. Some of my books are rather heavy. I'm just amazed.23

Rohr's statement is correct about young evangelicals. A case in point is an organization called IF: Gathering. The leaders of IF are dynamic energetic women who hold large conferences geared primarily toward young evangelical women. While these women may be sincere in what they are trying to do, they promote figures such as emergent leaders Brian McLaren and Rob Bell, as well as Richard Rohr. Lighthouse Trails has published a booklet on IF that I encourage you to read to understand the full scope of this growing women's movement.24

To further understand the significance of this, Rohr is a prominent champion for the idea of a global religion that would unify the world. He says that "religion needs a new language."25 And that language to bring about this one-world religion is mysticism (i.e., contemplative prayer)! Rohr stated:

> Right now there is an emergence . . . it's coming from so many different traditions and sources and parts of the world. Maybe it's an example of the globalization of spirituality.26

This view ties in perfectly with the emerging church's perspective that is so popular among younger evangelicals today. It's no wonder that Richard Rohr and emerging church leaders (such as Brian McLaren) are so supportive of each other and endorse each other's books.

In echoing Merton and Nouwen, Rohr also advocates the concept of dharmakaya. *This* is the recurring theme of the "school" of contemplative prayer. Rohr states:

> God's hope for humanity is that one day we will all recognize that the divine dwelling place is all of creation. Christ comes again whenever we see that matter and spirit co-exist. This truly deserves to be called good news.27

To dispel any confusion about what Rohr is saying, he makes it clear in the same paragraph what he means by God dwelling in all creation. He uses a term that one finds throughout contemplative literature, which signifies that Christ is more of an energy than a personal being. Rohr explains the term "cosmic Christ," telling readers that everything and everyone belongs to God's kingdom.28 That's even the name of one of his books, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer.*

In his 2011 book, *Falling Upward*, Rohr implies that we (humanity) are all an "immaculate conception."29 If these things are true, then there was no need for Jesus Christ to die on the Cross for the sins of mankind. We would not need a Savior because we would already be divine ourselves. In truth, contemplative spirituality is the antithesis of the Gospel. That is why there are countless mystics who claim to know God (or Jesus) but will have nothing to do with the Cross.

The New Age Connection

Lighthouse Trails Publishing's main endeavor since its inception has been to show the strong connection between the contemplative prayer movement and the broader spectrum of New Age spirituality as pointed out at the beginning of this booklet. One can prove the overwhelmingly strong parallels. The authors I have just profiled are not unique in what they say. I could list several pages of other contemplative authors that say the identical things.

I want to showcase one other author who represents the typical contemplative viewpoint. Tom Harpur, a well-known author, broadcaster, and Anglican priest in Canada sums up what you would find in virtually every contemplative book from the Roman Catholic and Anglican tradition. In talking about his upbringing in the traditional Anglican church, he explains the radical difference between his former Christianity and his contemplative Christianity:

> There was much more emphasis on our basic sinfulness and depravity than there ever was on the possibility of *God already being present* in our souls or "hearts." I was told to again accept Christ and "let him come in" instead of being helped to acknowledge the fact that all I had to do was to *open my inner eye and realize God was already there* waiting to be known and followed. We were taught little, if anything, about the great mystics and about the long tradition of meditation in our own Christian faith.30 (emphasis added)

Harpur makes Lighthouse Trails' point very succinctly that the mystical tradition that is coming to the forefront now does not correspond to the biblical Gospel that has been at the heart of Christianity.

Let me say this: If the contemplative prayer movement was not connected to historically respected denominations, that if it was an independent organization such as the ones found in books on cults, then the contemplative prayer movement would be labeled a cult by most evangelical organizations because of the extreme aberrations one finds concerning the Gospel. Merton's dharmakaya cannot be reconciled with justification through faith by the blood of Christ.

The Age of Enlightenment

Another good example to show that contemplative prayer shares the same view as known occultists can be found in a book called *Tomorrow's God* by New Age author Neale Donald Walsch, in which he presents the coming world religion that will unify mankind in what is called the Age of Aquarius or Age of Enlightenment (i.e., the New Age). He says the first step is to "[b]egin a schedule of daily practice in meditation, deep prayer, silent listening."31 After giving the mechanics of the new spirituality, Walsch gives the theology which is: "In the days of the New spirituality the unity of all things will be experiential."32

This is what the contemplatives experience in their mystical sessions. Walsch again says, "The Big Idea is that there is only One God, and this one God does not care whether you are Catholic or Protestant, Jewish or Muslim, Hindu or Mormon, or have no religion at all."33 This is basically what Richard Rohr is saying in *Everything Belongs.* And this is the reason why Richard Foster's "school" of contemplative prayer is not, and never will be, compatible with traditional biblical Christianity or the Gospel message proclaimed by Jesus Christ and his disciples.

Final Thoughts

If I were to ever meet someone who asked me, "why are you out to destroy Richard Foster?," I would tell them: I actually care about Richard Foster. The things I write about him are not out of malice or ill-will but out of a deep sense of commitment to his and his readers' spiritual well-being. *Celebration of Discipline* is at the heart (both directly or indirectly) of the majority of Spiritual Formation programs in Bible schools, seminaries, Christian colleges, and universities. What the Tibetan holy man said in response to Thomas Merton's belief—"There must be something wrong here!"—is the same sentiment that propels the writing of this booklet. There is something wrong here!

Contrary to what the contemplatives teach, there is duality, and the Bible teaches it—there are the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the tares, the saved and the unsaved, and the righteous and the unrighteous. New Age thinkers would reject this because they believe *all is God.* In the contemplative camp when Richard Rohr says everything belongs, this is what makes it New Age. The golden calf and Yahweh are not the same God. It was the cause for God's anger. Simply put, everything does not belong!

My prayer is that people can see the logic in this. And what makes it even more imperative is that this contemplative view comes from supernatural sources. We are not dealing with just human perspectives and ideas.

Richard Foster's "school" of contemplative prayer employs the same methods as those of Richard Rohr and Thomas Merton that lead to a certain perception. The following quote by Foster further illustrates this:

> We shut out every other source of stimulation—sensual, *intellectual* and reflective—in order to focus on God alone. At this level, we even move *beyond our thoughts* of God in order to dwell in his presence without thought or distraction.34

This is exactly the contemplative prayer that Thomas Merton embraced, which led Episcopal priest Brian C. Taylor to say:

> The God he [Merton] knew in prayer was the same experience that Buddhists describe in their enlightenment.35

What we conclude is that Thomas Merton's spirituality has come into the evangelical church through Richard Foster's "school" of contemplative prayer. And this is one school where no Christian should enroll.

To order copies of *A Serious Look at Richard Foster's "School" of Contemplative Prayer in booklet format,* click here.

Endnotes:

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2. Interview with Richard Foster, Lou Davies Radio Program (KPAM radio, Portland, Oregon, Nov. 24, 1998).
3. *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, p. 1283.
4. Carl McColman, *Big Book of Christian Mysticism* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Road Publishing, 2010), p. 222.
5. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New Directions Books, 1975), pp. 234-236.
6. Ibid.
7. William Shannon, *Silence on Fire* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991), p. 99.
8. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (HarperCollins, 2009, Kindle Edition), p. 17.
9. Tony Campolo, *Speaking My Mind* (Nashville, TN: W. Publishing Group, 2004), p. 72.
10. Rick Warren quoting Kay Warren on the Ministry Toolbox (Issue #54, 6/5/2002, http://web.archive.org/web/20050306004007/http://www.pastors.com/RWMT/?ID=54).
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12. Thomas Ryan, *Disciplines for Christian Living* (Mawah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), pp. 2-3 (the foreword by Henri Nouwen).
13. Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1991), p. 81.
14. Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1997), Jan. 15 and Nov. 16 daily readings.
15. Henri Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, Kindle Edition), Kindle Locations 496-497.
16. These two thoughts are found in the writings of Matthew Fox and many other New Age advocates.
17. Robert A. Jonas (Editor), *The Essential Henri Nouwen* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2009), p. 38.

18. Lighthouse Trails Editors, "More Evidence and a Final Plea as Assemblies of God Conference with Ruth Haley Barton Begins August 5th" (Lighthouse Trails blog: http://www.lighthousetrailsresearch.com/blog/?p=12401).
19. Thomas Keating, *Intimacy with God* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), p. 117.
20. Philip St. Romain, *Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality* (Crossroad, 1995). This excerpt is in the foreword by Thomas Keating.
21. Thomas Keating, review: http://www.allthingshealing.com/Tarot/Book-Review-Meditations-on-the-Tarot/9699#.VeGxISLbKos.
22. Lighthouse Trails Editors, "Richard Foster's Renovare Turns to Panentheist Mystic Richard Rohr and Emerging Darling Phyllis Tickle For New Book Project" (September 14, 2010, http://www.lighthousetrailsresearch.com/blog/?p=4986).
23. Kristen Hobby, "What Happens When Religion Isn't Doing Its Job: an interview with Richard Rohr, OFM" *(Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction*, Volume 20, No. 1, March 2014), pp. 6-11.
24. You can read the entire booklet at: http://www.lighthousetrailsresearch.com/blog/?p=17334 or purchase it as a booklet at www.lighthousetrails.com.
25. Kristen Hobby interview with Richard Rohr, op. cit. , p. 6
26. Ibid.
27. Rich Heffern, "The Eternal Christ in the Cosmic Story" *(National Catholic Reporter*, December 11, 2009, http://ncronline.org/news/spirituality/eternal-christ-cosmic-story).
28. Ibid.
29. Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2011), p. ix.
30. Tom Harpur, *Prayer: The Hidden Fire* (Wood Lake Publishing, Kindle Edition, 2012), Kindle Locations 1099-1102.
31. Neale Donald Walsch, *Tomorrow's God* (New York, NY: Atria Books, 2004), p. 223.
32. Ibid., p. 263.
33. Ibid., p. 241.
34. Richard Foster, Gayle Beede, *Longing for God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), p. 252.
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